

*[For] we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*

In the name of the Father...

I said yesterday that to view our sins from the perspective of the economy of salvation confronts us with a paradox, a paradox which is stated explicitly in the great hymn of the Easter liturgy, the *Exsultet*, which speaks of the sin of Adam as a *felix culpa*, or “happy fault”. According to this view of things, our sins are not to be regarded as nothing but waste and loss in our lives, but rather as the very means by which God, in his great love and mercy, has chosen to save us. We are saved, in other words, not despite our sins, but through them.

There can be no denying, however, that this perspective is one that in practice we find it profoundly difficult to accept, not only because we have a hard time believing it to be true, but because we rightly fear that it might be *dangerous* to believe it to be true. And at the heart of this difficulty lies the simple fact that to view our lives from the perspective of the economy of salvation, from the perspective of the *felix culpa*, requires us to be patient with our sins, and this is something we find it extremely difficult to be.

As I began to say yesterday, we are all of us, every day, being schooled in the instincts and thought-patterns of a secular economy that is profoundly intolerant of anything that smacks of waste or inefficiency. And so for us to try to be patient with our sins, with what we have come to regard as the areas of chronic weakness and

failure in our lives, goes profoundly against the instincts in which we have all been schooled.

But there is another reason why this patience with our sins leaves us feeling uneasy, one which springs from a very natural concern about the consequences of pursuing this line of thinking. Put simply: what is there to stop this patience with our sins from sliding into complacency about our sins? What is there to stop this patience with our sins deceiving us into believing that our sins are not really sins at all? It is this concern, more than any other, which explains why the *felix culpa*, despite its venerable place in the liturgy of Easter, remains something of an outlier in the history of theology, why it continues to have a whiff of heterodoxy about it.

And yet, for all the undoubted psychological force of this objection, it is one that ultimately rests upon a misunderstanding. To be patient with our sins is not the same thing either as indulging our sins or failing to recognise that they are sins. That is precisely the force of the paradox of the *felix culpa*. The fact that we can, from the perspective of the economy of salvation, come to see our faults as “happy” does not make them any less truly faults.

What this objection does highlight, however, is the very real practical difficulty we face with this effort to be patient with our sins. If it is true that patience with our sins does not automatically equal complacency about our sins, then there is no denying that it can degenerate into this kind of complacency. What is needed, therefore, is some means by which both the *felix* and the *culpa* of our sins can be held together, some means of not losing sight of the fact that our sins are indeed sins, while at the same time allowing that God has chosen to make of these sins the means of our

salvation. And what I want to suggest this evening is that we find this means, supremely, in the practice of prayer.

What happens when we pray? Well, if we are fortunate enough to have a place of silence to go to in our lives, then generally speaking we go to that place and we sit in silence and we begin to focus our attention on God. And then what happens? Well, if you are anything like me, then you will immediately be besieged by a whole army of distracting and generally unspiritual thoughts. Now some of these thoughts will be relatively innocuous, we will start thinking about some little task we have forgotten to do or will have to do after we have finished praying, or we will start thinking about what is going on next door or three doors down, or in number 10 Downing Street and yes, inevitably, we will start thinking about food. But if we persevere with this prayer then pretty soon we find ourselves confronted with thoughts that are not so innocuous and which spring from somewhere a little deeper within us. Some memory or other will come to mind in which we have been hurt or in which we have hurt others, and we will begin to play it over in our minds, we will start to wonder about the opinion others may have formed of us on the back of this event or we will start fixating on some wrong or injustice that has apparently been done to us. Or perhaps it will not be a memory that comes to us at all but another kind of thought. An ambitious thought, or a judgemental thought, or a good old-fashioned lustful thought.

In the end it doesn't really matter what kind of thought it is that comes to us, the end result is much the same, which is that what happens when we pray is that we are confronted, insistently and inescapably, with our sins. And if you think this is putting it a bit strongly, then it is worth remembering that the origin of the list of sins

we now know as the “seven deadly sins” is not some blood-soaked imperial court, but a monk sitting in the desert, trying to pray.

The Sixteenth Century Spanish friar St John of the Cross has a wonderful image for the soul setting out on the path of prayer, he says it is like a wet log that been thrown onto the fire. And what happens when the log is put on the fire is that the fire immediately causes all the moisture and the bugs and the creepy crawlies hiding inside the log to come to the surface. In other words, as soon as we put ourselves in the place of prayer what comes to the surface is the long and unpalatable litany of our sins.

And it is precisely at this point that our instinctive impatience with these distracting and time-wasting thoughts begins to show itself. What do we do when confronted with an angry or an ambitious or a judgemental thought in prayer? We immediately set about trying to exclude it from our minds. “No, no, no” we say to ourselves “I am not here to think about my mother-in-law, I am here to think holy thoughts”. And pretty soon we find we are putting all of our energy into fighting off these distracting thoughts. And yet, as all the great teachers of this kind of prayer will tell you, to try and fight off a distracting thought in prayer is just as sure-fire a way to get snarled up in it as engaging it directly. The only way to proceed is to allow these thoughts to be present, neither engaging them directly nor fighting to exclude them from our minds. In other words, the only way is to be patient with them.

And with this we begin to see why this kind of prayer is such an essential discipline if we are come to see our lives from the perspective of the *felix culpa*, if we are to succeed in being patient with our sins without falling into complacency about

them, without sliding into the belief that our sins are not really sins after all, because only in this kind of prayer does the very real pain and remorse we feel for our sins sit side by side with the capacity to be grateful for them, with the patient trust that God has willed to make of these very tawdry and humiliating sins the means of our salvation. Only in prayer do we learn that to try and chase our sins from our lives by the sheer force of will is only to land ourselves ever more fully ensnared in them.

Not only then is it true that without a living practice of prayer it is difficult for us to see our lives from the perspective of the *felix culpa*, from the perspective of the economy of salvation, we can I think go further than this and say that *only* in the context of a living practice of prayer can we responsibly believe in the *felix culpa* at all, can we responsibly believe that our faults can be happy, because only in prayer do the *felix* and the *culpa* of our sins coexist without either one of them crowding out the other.

But there is a second reason why this kind of prayer is essential if we are follow this pattern of thinking, if we are allow God to make of our sins the means of our salvation.

When St John of the Cross compares the soul starting out on the path of prayer to a wet log that has been put on a fire, he does so not only because the fire exposes all the ugliness that is hiding inside the log, but because eventually the fire will begin to dry out the log and cause it to burn brightly and well. And this is exactly what happens to us in prayer. Only when we allow our sinful thoughts to be present to us in our prayer, only when we stop trying to drive them from our minds, can we begin to learn what these thoughts have to tell us, can we begin to see the way in

which these patterns of thought are driving us in all kinds of ways in our daily lives without our realising it. Only when we allow our sinful thoughts to be present in our prayer can we begin to see these thoughts for what they really are which is in almost every case false and insubstantial. And to recognise an angry, or a judgemental, or a lustful thought for what it is is by its very nature to lessen the grip of that thought on us, it is to begin, not just to *see* our sinful patterns of thought, but to *see through* them, to expose them for the lies and fantasies that they really are. In other words, to be patient with our sins in prayer is the very means by which we come to be liberated from them. To be patient with our sins in prayer is the very means by which God makes of our sins the means of our salvation.

Abba Agathon, one of the very earliest monks of the Egyptian desert, was once asked by the brothers what of all the good works demanded of us requires the greatest effort. And he responded by saying this “Whatever good works a person undertakes if one perseveres in them, one will attain rest. But prayer” he said “is warfare to the last breath”. If what I have said about prayer this evening is true, then one of reasons it is such a battle for us is simply that it is prayer that keeps us faithful to the terms of a paradox that we would otherwise be incapable of sustaining, which would otherwise threaten to pull us apart. And yet if I am right about this, then in the marvellous and baffling economy of God, it is also prayer that leads us to the place of rest, of liberation, of salvation.

Amen.